12.12: The Crusades

12.12.1: Background: Disaster at Manzikert

On the surface, the Byzantine Empire of the eleventh century looked like one of the world’s great powers. It dominated the Eastern Mediterranean, with its emperors reigning from Constantinople, a city full of magnificent churches, splendid palaces, and centuries-old monuments of an ancient empire.

But these outward signs of strength concealed several weaknesses. In the first place, the theme system (see Chapter Seven) had begun to break down. The plots of land used to equip soldiers had gradually given way to large estates held
by powerful aristocrats. These powerful aristocrats often paid less and less in taxes, starving the state of key resources. The *theme* soldiers themselves were used less often (and when they did fight, they were often poorly trained and equipped), with the emperors relying on mercenaries for most of their fighting. The civilian aristocracy and the military were often at loggerheads.

The Byzantine emperors of the later eleventh century were nevertheless able to hold their own against external threats until the arrival of the Saljuq Turks in the Middle East (see Chapters Eight and Eleven). Both the Byzantine emperor Romanos IV (r. 1068 – 1071) and the Saljuq sultan Alps Arslan (r. 1063 – 1072) sought to control the Caucasus Mountains, whose passes controlled access to the Middle East from the Central Asian steppes. Control of this route was especially important as the steppes served as a source from which the Turks in the Middle East could recruit more fighters.

Byzantine and Turk finally clashed. Romanos sought to break the Turkish threat on his eastern flank and so mustered an immense army. This army consisted both of soldiers of the *themes* and mercenary units drawn from many different peoples: Western Europeans, Cumans and Pechenegs from the steppes, Scandinavians, and Turks. Both the heterogeneity of this army and the dysfunctional politics of the eleventh-century Byzantine Empire would prove to be Romanos’s undoing.

On 19 August 1071, the forces of the Byzantine Empire met those of the Great Saljuq Empire at the Battle of Manzikert near the shores of Lake Van in Armenia. The thematic troops were of indifferent quality, but worse for the emperor was the treachery of both the Byzantine commander Andronikos Doukas and the Byzantine force’s Turkic mercenaries. The Byzantine field army was annihilated. The emperor himself was surrounded and taken captive after his elite guard of Norse mercenaries went down fighting in his defense.
The result was a catastrophe for the Empire. Not only had most of the Byzantine Army been wiped out, but also competing Byzantine nobles took the opportunity of the emperor’s captivity to launch their own bids for power. During the decade of civil war that followed, the Empire’s holdings in Asia Minor almost all fell under the dominion of the Saljuq Turks. What had been the world’s most powerful Christian state now faced destruction.

Eventually, Alexios Komnenos (r. 1081 – 1118) would seize control of the Byzantine Empire and laboriously rebuild its military strength. Alexios was an able and clever military commander who also possessed good long-term sense. He used the tax base of the Empire’s Balkan possessions to fund a new army, one composed largely of foreign mercenaries and a small core of Greek soldiers. These indigenous soldiers were often granted out blocks of lands known as pronoiai (singular pronoia) whose revenues they would use to equip themselves and their soldiers; a pronoia was similar to a fief in Western Europe. He also recruited steppe peoples, such as the Cumans and Pechenegs, into his forces. Another group of peoples from which he recruited mercenaries was Western Europeans, particularly from the Holy Roman Empire and West Francia. In March of 1095, he sent a request to the pope for military assistance. The long-term consequences of this request would be earth-shaking.

12.12.2: The First Crusade

The pope who received Alexios Komnenos’s request for help was Urban II (r. 1088 – 1099), an associate of reformers
like Gregory VII. Churchmen seeking to reform society had looked to quell the violence that was often frequent in Western Europe (especially in France): this violence was usually the work of knights. These reformers were considering how knights could turn their aggression to pursuits that were useful to Christian society rather than preying upon civilians. Fighting against Muslims in Sicily and Spain showed the popes an example of knightly aggression directed towards Christendom’s external enemies (see Chapter Eight).

In addition, the Church had long recognized Roman Law’s concept of **Just War**: a war could be moral as long as it was defensive, declared by a rightful authority, and likely to cause less damage than if the war had not occurred. By the eleventh century, certain churchmen had further formulated this idea into one of **Holy War**, that is to say, that a war fought in defense of the Church was not only morally right, but even meritorious.

The final element that led to Pope Urban II’s turning much of the military might of Western Europe to the Middle East was the idea of Jerusalem. The city of Jerusalem was where Jesus Christ was said to have been crucified, to have died, and to have risen from the dead (see Chapter Six). As such, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, built on what was said to be the empty tomb from which Christ had risen was the holiest Church in the Christian world—and this Church had been under the control of Muslims since Caliph Umar’s conquest of Palestine in the seventh century (see Chapter Eight). The city remained important to Christians, however, and, even while it was under Muslim rule, they had traveled to it as **pilgrims**, that is, travelers undertaking a journey for religious purposes.

Pope Urban thus conceived of the idea of turning the military force of Western Europe to both shore up the strength of the flagging Byzantine Empire (a Christian state), and return Jerusalem and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher to Christian rule after four centuries of Muslim domination.

On 27 November 1095, he gathered several of the major nobles of Western Europe (as well as many lower-ranked knights) to an open-air sermon at Clermont, where he was presiding over a Church council. In this sermon, he proclaimed that it was the duty of these warrior aristocrats, as Christians, to defend the Byzantine Empire and to put the city of Jerusalem under Christian rule. The result was an enthusiastic response by those knights, who are said to have cried out, “God wills it!” and to have vowed to set off to Jerusalem and bring it under Christian rule. Furthermore, as word of Pope Urban’s admonition spread throughout Western Europe, more and more of the knightly class answered the call, mustering under the leadership of several powerful nobles.

This movement of the knights of most of Western Europe to fight against Muslims in the Middle East is generally known as the first of a series of **Crusades**. A crusade was a war declared by the papacy against those perceived to be enemies of the Christian faith (usually, but not always, Muslims). Participating in a crusade would grant a Christian forgiveness of sins. We ought to note that such a concept in many ways superficially resembled the Muslim notion of the Lesser Jihad (see Chapter Eight).
As these forces mustered and marched south and east, the religious enthusiasm accompanying them often spilled out into aggression against non-Christians other than Muslims. One group of Crusaders in the area around the Rhine engaged in a series of massacres of Jewish civilians, traveling from city to city while killing Jews and looting their possessions before this armed gang was forced to disperse.

The Crusaders traveled in two main waves. The first traveled to the Byzantine Empire, and was ferried across the Bosporus but was wiped out by a Turkish army. The second wave, however, was better planned and coordinated, and, upon its arrival in the Byzantine Empire, reached an uneasy truce with the Alexios Komnenos (who had been expecting a modest force of mercenaries and not the armed might of most of Western Europe). The Crusaders were fortunate. After Nizari had assassinated Nizam al-Mulk and the Fatimid caliph of Egypt had died (both in 1092), the Middle East fell into political chaos (see Chapter Eight). When the Crusaders marched east in 1096, they encountered not a unified Great Saljuq Empire, but a collection of independent and semi-independent sultans and emirs.

The Crusaders moved east, winning a string of victories in Asia Minor: when they could not be outmaneuvered, the armored knights of Western Europe often stood at an advantage against the lightly armored or unarmored mounted...
archers that mostly made up the bulk of Turkish forces. Following the path of the crusading army, Alexios was able to restore much of western Asia Minor to the control of the Byzantine Empire, although the central Anatolian plateau would remain under the dominion of the Saljuq Turks. The Crusaders advanced on Antioch, the largest and most prosperous city of the Levant, and, after a siege of nearly a year, both seized control of the city and defeated a Turkish army that attempted to relieve it. The army then marched south to Jerusalem and into territory controlled by the Fatimid caliphate—itself a Shi’ite state that was no friend of the Sunni Saljuq Turks. Venice and Genoa, meanwhile, transported supplies to the Crusaders by sea. The Crusaders rejected Fatimid overtures for a negotiated settlement and, in June of 1099, arrived outside the walls of Jerusalem. The Crusaders stormed the city’s walls, and, as the city fell, it was subject to a brutal sack, with both the city’s defenders and its civilian population subject to a bloody slaughter. We must note that there was nothing particularly unique about this massacre. The custom among most pre-modern peoples was that if a city resisted an attacking army, then it would be subject to sack and massacre of its population were it to fall.

After the fall of Jerusalem, the Crusaders established four states in the Levant: the County of Edessa, in northern Mesopotamia, the Principality of Antioch, centered on the city of Antioch and its environs; the County of Tripoli, in what is roughly Lebanon today; and the Kingdom of Jerusalem, which occupied Palestine and whose capital was the city of Jerusalem. These states were ruled by men (and often women) who were Catholic in religion and ethnically Western European. The religion and institutions of these Crusader States were nearly the same as those of Western Europe.

These states attracted some settlers, in both their warrior aristocracy and even merchants and peasants. But many of the subjects of the Christian rulers of these kingdoms were Muslims (or Christian Arabs, who had special privileges over their Muslim counterparts, but fewer rights than Catholic, ethnically Western European Christians). Indeed, the Crusader States would consistently suffer from a lack of manpower: although the pope had spoken of rich lands for the taking in Palestine, most of the knights who had gone on the First Crusade (and survived) returned to Western Europe. The Crusader States relied on extensive networks of heavily fortified stone castles for defense. They were fortunate that the Middle East was politically fragmented and Fatimid Egypt was weak. Whether these states would be sustainable in the face of stronger Muslim powers remained to be seen.